



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom, Violence, and U.S. Policy in Nigeria

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Frederick A. Davie, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you, Chair Turkel and thank you to everyone joining our hearing today. Discussing the religious freedom implications of violence in Nigeria is a mammoth task. As we dive more deeply into the discussion, I want to frame the conversation with a few reflections from my June trip there, where I spoke with a diverse variety of religious, civil society, and government stakeholders.

First, in the tenuous Nigeria context, religious minorities and individuals with dissenting beliefs or interpretations are being forgotten and excluded from the religious freedom dialogue. For example, few stakeholders we met with discussed the cases of humanist leader Mubarak Bala and Tijaniyya Muslim musician Yahaya Sharif Aminu. USCIRF has highlighted these religious prisoners of conscience in our meetings but they still remain relatively absent from Nigerians' discussion regarding freedom of religion or belief. Both men are detained on charges of blasphemy for expressing their dissenting beliefs. I implore all those fighting for freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria to remember that we cannot ignore or sacrifice those with minority or dissenting beliefs in our fight to quell violence and religious freedom violations in Nigeria. Nigeria must be safe for all religious and belief communities, and be a country where religious freedom flourishes.

Second, it is important to note that it is not just freedom of religion or belief that is under attack in Nigeria, but many human rights protected under international law. USCIRF focuses specifically on the right to freedom of religion or belief, but we recognize that in Nigeria, as is often the case, violations of this right correspond with other types of human rights abuses and atrocity risk factors. Today we've engaged a diverse array of experts to help us build a wholistic approach to addressing the drivers of violence impacting religious freedom in Nigeria.

Finally, I want to highlight that one of the main findings from USCIRF's research delegation to Nigeria is that poor governance plays a major role in driving violence and instability. Many of our interlocutors, from across Nigeria's religious spectrum, reported that the Nigerian government could be doing more to address institutional failures and weaknesses that have led to a culture of poor security and judicial sector performance and impunity for violence, including violence against religious communities. It is because of this violence, as well as the issues outlined by Vice Chair Cooper, that USCIRF has repeatedly recommended, most recently in April 2022, that the State Department designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. We hope the State Department's list of CPC designations that is expected later this year will once again include Nigeria.

With these reflections, I return the floor back to Chair Turkel to introduce our witnesses.